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ABSTRACT

Investment in literacy upgrading can pay rich dividends in both quality of life for individuals and benefits to society. Literacy can become the gateway to a fuller understanding of ideas and responsible participation as citizens. Unfortunately, academic abilities of schooled youth are not keeping pace with the skills/knowledge requirements of existing and prospective jobs in the present-day economy. Under-preparation of youth wastes the nation's most precious resource--the productive potential of people. All responsible citizens must become advocates for higher levels of literacy throughout the nation and insist that basic skills be strongly emphasized at all levels of education. (RS)

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Literacy/Quality of Life in the United States

Boris Blai Jr.

Overview

Few, if any, would challenge the assertion that literacy is a prerequisite for full participation in our democracy. Literacy is essential for maximizing the quality-of-life for each individual. In our American society, a characterization of responsible presumes that each eligible citizen has both the right and the obligation to cast informed votes , both in national and local governmental elections.

In addition, to exercise such rights and obligations in an intelligent, reasoned manner is absolutely essential for sound, effective government practices to exist throughout the nation. This claim is axiomatic, for in the final analysis good government is basically dependent upon the quality of the peoples' collective judgements.

Clearly then, the larger the number of people capable of communicating well; the greater the number making informed judgements (regarding their own individual lives and society in general), the higher can be the quality-of-life for larger numbers of American citizens. In short - it is in the best interests of the general public to achieve the highest levels of literacy of which they are individually capable.

Over the years in this country, this general line of reasoning has led to the establishment of:

1- tax-supported, tuition-free schools

2- publically-supported colleges

3- public tuition-assistance programs

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And certainly noone questions the vital need for citizens to acquire the ability to read books and newspapers; to make informed, disctiminating judgements regarding TV programs; to effectively communicate their views so that they are understood; ; to reason out whom they will support for elective office, and what public pokucues and programs they will actively support.

Therefore, it is clearly a major challenge, when one examines the sobering

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statistics which reflect very substantial numbers of adults who cannot read, cannot write, and cannot compute well. The loss, both to individuals in terms of their personal quality-of-life, and to the nation as a whole in terms of its productivity and general welfare, is tragically large. In our modern-day increasingly technical and scientifically advanced society, such abilities-deficiencies are further exacerbated by the additional needs for literacy to insure the development, maintenance, and use of our expanding technology. In effect then, the investment in literacy-upgrading can pay rich dividends in personal, individual performance and societal benefits. Such literacy qualifications become the gatewayfor a fuller understanding of ideas - both new and old. The importance of such understanding cannot be overemphasized for such ideas are the basic building blocks for achieving improved quality-of-life experiences for all peoples.

Educational Quality/Literacy

In our present-day society, the level of necessary academic competence is constantly rising as employment for technical/scientific jobs expands. However, recent-year assessments reveal that the existing academic competence of American youth continues to decline. In reality then, the gap-in-literacy widens; i.e., academic abilities of schooled youth are not keeping pace with the skills/knowledge requirements of existing and prospective jobs in our economy.

The all too familiar picture of unemployed youth hanging out on streets, feeling hopelessly unable to work - attests to the serious dimensions of this socio-economic ill. Much of this social and economic dysfunction has a common, underlying cause - the lack of appropriate academic skills/knowledge necessary for empkoyment. The widespread existence of vigorous employment recruitment practices strongly suggests that to a very substantial degree, the clear gap between job skills/knowledge requirements and the academic abilities of youth remains alarmingly large.

Today, practically all available jobs require a solid academic preparation

and most especially in reading and writing. Therefore, the substantial segment of our population which remains unemployed (being unemployable because of unacceptable levels of academic preparation), 'triggers' serious socio-economic problems, among them being the major social consequences of widespread crime and poverty. Additionally, the productive capacity of American industry is seriously reduced becayse of inadequately trained/educated manpower resources. In short - such under-preparation of youth grossly wastes our most precious resource - the productive potential of people!

And let there be no mistake - many of the serious people-problems we face today stem directly from the inability of so many individuals to fully participate as productive members of our society. In fact, in the early 1980s educational practices reflected a pervasive public attitude which stressed the need for higher quality standards in schooling, at all levels. As Boyer and Hechinger (1981) point out:

> "Today we have a rising chorus of complaints about the quality of schooling. We see a national rush to reduce investment in education. ... This flagging commitment reflects frustration over failing test scores; conflicts over national priorities; taxpayer revolts, and recognition that education is not a panacea to cure every social ill." (p.24)

This "pervasive public attitude" accompanied the well-documented decline in academic skilss among youth in attendance at all levels of schooling; i.e., from kindergarten clear into graduate school! Accompanying this decline, significant shifts occured in the job composition of the American economy. Before World War II, approximately 80 percent of the workforce were in unskilled jobs. By the early 1980s, this had declined to less than 20 percent.

Consequently, the dramatic increase occuring in the burgeoning field of information technology has necessitated upgrading communications skills jobs requirements. For example, in 1950, about 17 percent of all jobs included information processing tasks; in the early 1980s this had reached 54 percent - and it continues to rise.

In this connection, it is germane to point out that as the use of technologies continue to increase throughout the nation, communications technologies

have the potential to transform the educational process. These new technologies in communications can help spread learning more pervasively throughout our culture. As Needham (1986), referencing Cross (1981) points out:

> "The development of communications technologies and their application to learning has brought about the diffusion of higher education's monopoly on formal learning beyond high school. Not so long ago, a learner had to enroll in a course in order to learn how to write better business letters, compute more accurately, or read more rapidly. Now , however, with individualized instruction available in colleges, in public libraries, and in video outlets, the learning environment is changing. Nudging that change is the development of many forms of distance learning, including electronic universities. All of these allow students to learn within the setting of their own choosing and to aquire credentials for their achievements, if they so desire. The outcome for formal postsecondary education could be a vast constriction of current providers. On the other hand, community colleges, and other components of the formal learning system, can benefit because research has repeatedly shown that the more education people have, the more likely they are to partucupate in further education." (p.3)

In brief then, the combined effect of up-graded academic skills/knowkedge requirements for effective performance of job tasks, coupled with a marked decline of communications skills among schooled youth, has left millions of them poorly prepared to perform satisfactorily in the world-of-work. Many have been unable to gain employment. As a direct consequence, they have been unable to sustain themselves as productive members of the economy. It is abundantly clear that this crisis in literacy must be vigorously addressed by the educational community in particular - American society in general. This urgently requires full commitment, and probably well into the forseeable future.

The Recovery Road

To substantially increase the level of literacy among youth can lead to real opportunities for job employment. This, in turn, can help improve their quality-of-life , especially for those living in depressed and deprived communities. Ultimately, suitably qualified youth moving into good jobs can help provide them with the econnomic resources to upgrade their communities. Specifically:

1- elementary and secondary school curricula must be responsive to this need for equipping students with appropriate skills/knowledge. They must, where neccessary, raise and maintain academic achievement performance standards.

And, wherever possible, the share of the curriculum devoted to basics - reading, writing, computation - should be increased.

2- The basic reading, writing, computation skills must, once again, become the keystone subjects of elementary schooling. These must be assiduously honed. And the abominable practice of passing through - yes, even graduating, youth who are functional illiterates, must be stamped out! It makes absolutely no sense for students with academic deficiencies to be promoted-up-and-out! That virtually guarantees their failure to successfully articulate from schooling to the world-of-work! Remedial instruction at higher-level schooling can salvage some of these fail-outs, but many cannot or do not avail themselves of such assistance and remain in borderline quality-of-life existence thereafter.; truely, social misfits.

3- Parents must demand from their schools appropriate homework assignments for their children. They must also carefully insist that their children do complete their homework - consistently, thereby indicating both their interest and support for the schooling of their children.

4- All responsible citizens - and especially parents - must consistently communicate to youth the practical and urgent importance of learning well the in their schooling the essential skills of reading, writing, and computation.

5- The American public, within its local school districts, at the state level, and nationally - must consistently support qualified teachers who are key partners in the learning development of American children and learners of all ages.

Each time any one of the above-cited resources-for-literacy does not carry out its contributing responsibility - (which means quality-controlled schooling/learning suffers!) - the productive potential and quality-of-life of Americans is thereby reduced. All responsible citizens must become advocates for higher levels of literacy throughout the nation. Failure to do so can only exacerbate a serious socio-economic flaw in our society. Failure to substantively strengthen our literacy levels can only continue to 'short-change' our youth and our country. Such shortsightedness simply robs youth of opportunities to live as productive,

participating, and contributing members of our nation. Clearly, there is but one course to follow, for Ignorance breeds failures - Literacy breed opportunities !

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